Religion and Consumption

Prasannan Parthasarathi

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Forty years ago, W. Arthur Lewis wrote that restraints on consumption have "been recognized as a virtue in all ages and by nearly all religions".[1] Lewis' interest in limits on consumption derived from his belief that modern ideas, such as a desire for goods, are necessary for the development process. Although our priorities are very different, and perhaps quite the opposite, religious beliefs hold out the promise of aiding the struggle to set limits on consumption.

As Lewis recognized, the ascetic impulse, which is associated with virtually all religions and is found in Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, ancient Greek, Christianity, Islam, Celtic, Persian, Roman, and pre-Buddhist Japanese (Shintoism), was one of ways in which the desire for goods could be dampened.[2] According to Lewis, asceticism may be linked to reduced consumption in several ways. First, high value is placed on the ability to control one's desires, including food, sex, comfort and other satisfactions. Second, pursuit of wordly occupations, and the benefits that follow, is thought to distract from the spiritual life and is thus to be avoided. This was found in Judaism and early Christianity, for instance.[3] Finally, in some cases the pursuit of worldly gain was thought to produced undesirable competition against fellow humans, which could be avoided by consuming as little as possible.

Although few people fully entered into the ascetic lifestyle and the regime of denial, and even self-flagellation, that it required, the ascetic was a respected figure in many societies. The

figure of the renouncer, for example, is a potent one in the Hindu context.[4] It is this respect accorded to the ascetic which leads the lay population to emulate such practises. In Lewis' opinion, the greatest emulation by the laity was to be found in areas where Hinduism and Buddhism held sway.[5]

Ascetism as an ideal could have an impact on consumption in another way as well. In particular, we have in mind Max Weber's concept of the inner-wordly ascetic who seeks the accumulation of wealth not for the purpose of its enjoyment, but purely as the satisfaction of a calling. Thus, inner-worldly asceticism, which for Weber was exemplified in Protestantism, leads to a high valuation of thrift and frugality.[6] It is striking that Mahatma Gandhi, a great believer in simple living, had a mindset which strongly resembled that of the inner-worldy asceticism of Protestants.[7]

Other religions also pointed out the dangers of attachment to wealth, although perhaps not in the ways Weber identified in Protestantism. In both Hindu and Buddhist traditions, the attachment to wealth was seen as an impediment to enlightenment. In Mahayana Buddhism, the <u>bodhisattva</u> (the aspirant to Buddhahood) was at times portrayed as a rich man who shared his material and spiritual wealth with those around him.[8] However, as this example also shows, the danger was not in the accumulation of wealth, but in attachment to it. Thus, both Buddhism and Hinduism have no strictures against wealth. In fact, in Hinduism it is possible to

pray for wealth and Hindu merchants strongly connect their religion and their economic activities.[9]

In Islam as well the real rewards of wealth are gained through acts of generosity. Wealth was not an end in itself, but a means to serve God. Indeed, according to the Koran, excessive striving for material possessions may bring ruin: "If any do wish for the transitory things of life we readily grant them--such things as we will to such persons s we will . . . [but] . . . in the end we have provided hell for them".[1]

By contrast, although the Talmud contains references to the virtues of poverty, Judaism sees wealth and the possession of material goods as a blessing and sign of divine approval. According to one commentator: "Mainstream Judaism saw man's material welfare as a reward from Heaven, a gift from the Deity, and therefore as something not intrinsically bad, but rather to be valued and prized". Nevertheless, ostentation and luxury were thought to be undesirable.[10] In particular, Rabbis and devout Jews have traditionally restrained consumption and followed relatively simple lifestyles.[11]

In East Asia, the strongest opposition to materialism and consumption is to be found in Taoism, which emphasizes frugality and voluntary simplicity. In its early days, Christianity took a

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[1]Rodney Wilson, Economics, Ethics and Relgion: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Economic Thought (New York, 1997), p. 123.

similar stance and articulated a radical critique of wealth and the wealthy. The sayings of Jesus himself reflect this hard attitude towards riches and the spiritual dangers it poses. For instance: "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions". Similarly: "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money".[12] Early Christians were also influenced by Stoicism and they taught a Stoic indifference to worldly things. An important outgrowth of these views was the idea that the earth is a "common treasury" given by God to all of humanity.[13]

As Christianity became more established, however, the attitude towards wealth softened, and the problem became one of minimizing attachment to riches, much like Buddhist and Hindu attitudes discussed earlier. Nevertheless, thrift and the need to minimize material pleasures continues to play a part in Christian teachings to our day. This is reflected in the seven deadly sins, of which two are avarice and gluttony.[14]

Given the hostility of religious teachings to materialism and overconsumption, how are we to reconcile the continued existence of religion with growing consumerism in the world today? In particular, according to Robert Wuthnow, consumption has invaded the whole of our existence:

In industrial society the average worker came against the

> leading edge of material expansion primarily in the workplace itself--as a producer. The rawest effects of the material realm could thus be cordoned off by protecting the home, by keeping women and children out of the labor market, by limiting the work week, by creating parks, and be encouraging people to have family devotions in the evening or to attend church and Sunday school on weekends. In postindustrial society the meaning of materialism has moved decidedly from production to consumption. . . Consumption cannot be bracketed so easily by the simple arrangement of places or schedules, especially when mass media penetrates private life and public life alike.[15]

The result in the United States, according to Wuthnow, has been the retreat of religion into a shrinking sphere of the personal life, and often even of the mind, as material goods have taken over more and more space, both public and private. In his words: "It may be very difficult for us to draw this distinction in our behaviour--for instance, by finding some time, place, or activity that is 'really me' and uncontaminated by material goods--so we draw the distinction in our minds". This notion strikingly parallels Jurgen Habermas' notion of the system colonizing the life-world.[16] Thus, rather than constructing an oppostion to consumerism, religion has been another one of its victims.

NOTES

1.W. Arthur Lewis, The Theory of Economic Growth (London, 1955), p. 233.

2.The Theory of Economic Growth, pp. 24-6. Also see the entry "Asceticism" in James Hasting (ed.), Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, vol. II (New York, 1909).

3.Rodney Wilson, Economics, Ethics and Religion (New York, 1997), p. 31-32.

4.J. C. Heesterman, The Inner Conflict of Tradition (Chicago, 1985), chap. 2.

5.Also see Morris David Morris, "Values as an Obstacle to Economic Growth in South Asia: An Historical Survey", Journal of Economic History, xxvii (1967).

6.H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), From Max Weber (New York, 1946), p. 325; Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (New York, 1958).

7.For details see Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, The Modernity of Tradition (Chicago, 1967),pp. 216-40.

8.See the entry "Wealth" in Mircea Eliade (ed.), The Encyclopedia of Religion, vol. 15 (New York, 1987).

9.See C. A. Bayly, Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars (Cambridge, 1983) and David West Rudner, Caste and Capitalism in Colonial India (Berkeley, 1994).

10.Meir Tamari, With All Your Possessions: Jewish Ethics and Economic Life (New York, 1987), p. 30.

11.Tamari, All Your Possessions, pp. 56-8.

12.Luke, 12:15 and Luke, 16:13.

13."Wealth", in Eliade (ed.), Encyclopedia of Religion.

14.Kurt Samuelsson, Religion and Economic Action (New York, 1961), pp. 81-2; Robert Wuthnow, God and Mammon in America (New York, 1994); William Leach, Land of Desire (New York, 1993), pp. 192-3.

15.Wuthnow, God and Mammon in America, p. 160.

16. Jurgen Habermas, _The Theory of Communicative Action_ (Boston, 1984).